



“Academic and Financial Accountability and Transparency in California Community Colleges?”

Testimony by Brice W. Harris, Chancellor

Los Rios Community Colleges before the

Joint Committee on the Master Plan for Higher Education

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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee on the issues of academic and financial accountability in California Community Colleges.

Los Rios is one of 72 community college districts in California. Located here in the Sacramento region, our four colleges serve more than 90,000 students each semester or nearly one of every eleven adults living in our service area. All our faculty and staff work daily to help make our students as successful as possible, and to serve as many of them as our resources will allow. These dual values of student success and access drive our decision making and are at the heart of our academic and financial accountability. My comments this morning are designed to inform you about how we work to document our performance through accountability and suggest ways this Committee might assist us in our quest to be as transparent as possible for both policy makers and the public.

Academic Accountability: In addressing academic accountability, let me first mention the two main tools we use to track our performance – regional accreditation and the California Accountability Reporting for Community Colleges or ARCC system.

Our colleges are accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges – Accrediting Commission for Community Colleges. This Commission reviews colleges in California, Hawaii and the Pacific Islands against a rigorous set of standards encompassing Institutional Mission and Effectiveness; Student Learning Programs and Services; Human, Financial and other Resources, and Leadership and Governance. Two years prior to the arrival of the accreditation visiting team, colleges typically begin to develop extensive Self Studies which candidly assess their performance against the standards. In recent years this process has become more rigorous especially as it relates to planning, program evaluation and student learning outcomes. The results of a college’s accreditation review are openly communicated to the public and the final reports from the Commission are public documents.

The ARCC report is produced annually by the State Chancellor’s Office of Research and is based on data submitted by the colleges. The report includes student demographics, key student success indicators and compares colleges against groups of peer institutions. Specifically the ARCC looks at student success in basic skills, persistence, academic achievement, achievement in career and vocational courses as well as other measures of student success.

Our colleges monitor numerous other aspects of academic accountability and present those data to our elected Trustees and to the public. This *TrendLines* report is but

one example of a Los Rios annual dashboard report on both access and student success that is reported to our Board of Trustees and included in the District's annual report to the community. We take the success of our students seriously and as long as even one student is not achieving his or her educational goals we still have work to do.

Financial Accountability: Financial accountability is a critical component of our relationship with taxpayers and the public. Our financial health is monitored by numerous means – chief among those are annual audits of all funds, quarterly financial reporting to the State, and the State required annual budget development. Additionally, the State and Federal governments have numerous financial requirements such as the 50% law, categorical funding, oversight of bond funds for facility construction and modernization, and federal and state student financial aid. All these rules require periodic reporting at the local, state and federal levels.

To be specific Los Rios has an annual operating budget of approximately \$300 million and a facilities program that will invest nearly a billion dollars in construction and modernization over the next decade. Annually we develop a budget according to the state guidelines for presentation to our Board of Trustees. Our operational budget is driven by a strategic plan that has student success and access as the two main components. In addition to our elected Board, we have budget committees including representatives from all constituent groups at each of the four colleges and at the District.

At the local level accountability can best be demonstrated by how an organization succeeds in times of great financial stress. Los Rios has a history of excellent relations with its four collective bargaining groups and we use an interest-based approach in dealing with our differences. Most recently, we developed a three-year plan for managing through the current fiscal crisis that includes a balanced approach utilizing redirection of existing resources, reductions in current spending and utilization of reserves. It was a combination of our conservative budgeting, this three-year plan, our excellent employee relations and the transparency of our process that recently helped us earn an upgrade in our bond rating during a time when many organizations are facing a downgrading.

The current financial crisis has caused Los Rios as well as many other California community colleges to make difficult decisions. We find ourselves having to reduce our offerings at a time when enrollment pressures have never been higher. This current semester for example Los Rios was forced to reduce classes by about 4% or 315 sections and our enrollment still increased by nearly 3.5% to a high of more than 92,000. Like many other districts, Los Rios currently teaches many students for which we receive no funding. This over-cap enrollment is difficult to manage without adequate faculty and staff. At a time when we face the largest high school graduating class in the state's history as well as high levels of unemployed and under employed workers seeking retraining and upgrading, we find ourselves turning away thousands. As the State has requested, we have focused class reductions in a way designed to protect basic skills, transfer, and career and vocational education. However, this is difficult since virtually all our classes can be used to satisfy certificate and degree requirements. Thus, accountability in a time of decreasing funding is especially challenging. When your two most important values are student access and student success and there are inadequate resources – those values can be in conflict. We are all concerned that our accountability

reporting in coming months will show the negative impact of declining funding on both access and success. And, policy makers must take care not to limit access of students that need our colleges the most in the name of improving success. The success rates in higher education of students who can not get into college will always be zero.

Accountability Improvements: Like most other organizations we have experienced a dramatic rise in the amount of accountability required in the past decade. As a large public organization we are required to report on a wide array of things from the very specific like the quality of the water in our boilers to very all-encompassing things such as those for regional accreditation. This 56-page document is a listing of the 982 different accountability reports one or more of the Los Rios colleges is expected to complete at some point during the year by one agency or another at the federal, state, regional or local level. These various reports may require simply reading a dial and completing a form or nearly two years of preparation involving hundreds of people in the development on our institutional self-studies. Additionally, we track our own performance in an effort to achieve continuous quality improvement on everything from student success to the amount of energy we use to light our classrooms. We certainly do not fear accountability although we do experience accountability fatigue.

Improving Community College Accountability: California community colleges are one of the most thoroughly researched public bodies in existence. It would be difficult to imagine a system that produces as much data for as many different constituents. We slice and dice these data continually in an effort to meet a multitude of requirements from numerous stakeholders at every level, and yet there seems to be a never-ending appetite for more accountability and more transparency. With this in mind, I make the following five suggestions for this joint committee to consider.

1. **Work to reduce the overlap in reporting requirements:** Unfortunately many of the reporting requirements from different agencies are very similar and yet are required to be presented in different formats.
2. **Attempt to make as few changes in the way data is reported over time as possible in order to make longitudinal trends valid:** Changing the way in which data are reported from year-to-year makes comparisons between years difficult at best and often invalid.
3. **Encourage various agencies to leverage the existing data collection at the State Chancellor's Office rather than requiring colleges to recreate data for every report:** The Chancellor's Office has an extremely robust data collection system, and is the logical point for reporting on the colleges and their students. Rather than requiring colleges to recreate data that may already exist, State agencies should first request data from the Chancellor's Office. If there are data not collected centrally they should be integrated into the system data collection as opposed to resurveying colleges annually.
4. **Avoid "pay-for-performance" accountability:** There is no evidence to prove that outcomes based funding improves student performance, and there is every reason to believe it will harm access. Clearly communicated state-wide goals for student success accompanied by accountability overseen by

locally elected Boards of Trustees is the best recipe for improving student success while protecting access.

5. **Focus on what is most important:** Reaching agreement on the key measures of success for our colleges and focusing on those measures will reduce the human and financial expense of excess reporting and ultimately result in making a greater impact on student success.

Summary: The age old adage that suggests the things we measure will be the things that improve is true. However, attempting to measure everything probably does not result in the improvement of everything. A sharper focus on the key academic and financial outcomes—applied evenly to all colleges will help reduce reporting requirements that are redundant and allow policy makers to make effective and strategic investments. The faculty and staff of our colleges come to work each day with a desire to help our students reach their educational goals. We welcome accountability that clearly defines success, details exactly how that success is to be measured, and sets realistic goals based on available resources.

Thank you for your time.

